ZACK SNYDER, FRANK MILLER AND HERODOTUS: THREE TAKES ON THE 300 SPARTANS[1]

G N Murray (Stellenbosch University)

The heroic defence of the Greeks at the battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC, in particularly the 300 Spartans who stood to the last man against the much larger Persian force, prompted comic book writer and illustrator Frank Miller to retell this story from a purely Spartan perspective. This version was retold once again when director Zack Snyder created a filmed version of the graphic novel named *300*. Despite the film's achievements at the box office, it was attacked for being, amongst others, historically incorrect and ideologically biased. In the graphic novel Frank Miller tells the tale of the battle at Thermopylae through the eyes of a Spartan warrior who bore the responsibility of spreading their tale so that the Spartans' sacrifice might compel other Greek city-states to stand together against the Persians. Therefore the graphic novel and especially the film are drenched with Spartan superiority and Persian inferiority. Despite the inaccuracies and ideological bias, there are a few moments in the graphic novel and film that are notably historically correct.

Introduction

In 480 BC a small force of Greek soldiers defended the pass at Thermopylae, blocking the much larger Persian invasion force from entering Greece. Whether the Greeks, led by an even smaller Spartan contingent of only 300 hoplite soldiers under the Spartan king Leonidas, had truly expected to keep the Persians indefinitely at bay, is a topic that has frequently been discussed by scholars. History does not allow an answer to that question to present itself since the Persians discovered a hidden route that allowed them to encircle the Greeks from all sides. Leonidas then decided to send the rest of the Greeks home but remained with his Spartans to cover their retreat. Exactly what his motives for that decision were is at best speculative; was it a completely selfless act of self-sacrifice, an attempt at glory-mongering through martyrdom, or sound and economic military tactics?

Whatever the *true* motives, the 300 Spartan soldiers' stand against the biggest army the world had yet seen, an act more of the stuff of myth and fantasy than history, grabbed the emotions and imaginations of particularly the Western world for generations to come. Earlier this year there was but one more example of homage paid to the 300 Spartans as seen in the aptly named film *300*,[2] which retells the defence of Thermopylae from an exclusively Spartan point of view. The aim of the film was clearly not to be historically accurate, but is rather a tribute to the heroic and fearsome Spartan defenders.

---

1 This article is based on the author's presentation at the CASA Spring Meeting of 2007 at the University of Cape Town.

2 Warner Bros. Pictures, directed by Zack Snyder, starring Gerard Butler, Lena Headey, David Wenham and Dominic West. http://wwws.warnerbros.co.uk/300/

The reception of 300

The film *300* was released for the first time in Sparta on the 7th of March 2007 and the next day in the rest of Greece. In the United States it was released on the 9th of March and grossed $28,106,731 on its opening day and $70,885,301 at the end of its opening weekend on the 11th of March.[3] It was the third-biggest opening for an R-rated film after *The Matrix Reloaded* ($91.8 million) and *The Passion of the Christ* ($83.8 million).[4] At its closing date four months later on July 12th, it had grossed a total of $456,068,181 worldwide – quite lucrative since it cost only $65 million to make.[5]

The graphic novel on which the film was based was initially published as a monthly five-issue limited series comic book in May 1998.[6] In 1999 it won three Eisner awards: Best Limited Series, Best Writer/Artist (Frank Miller) and Best Colourist (Lynn Varley).[7]

The film has clearly proved very popular. In short, it features clean and honourable heroes butchering their way through their sinister and demonic enemies and finally, standing firm against insurmountable odds, making the ultimate sacrifice – all graphically stunning and with a story line that is not too hard to understand.[8] But it was these features in particular that invited most of the criticism levelled at the film: for all its popularity, it was criticised for being too simplistic, relying far too much on its visuals and computer-generated effects, and for its lack of a proper story line and actual character development. On a cultural level the film was criticised and even attacked for being historically inaccurate, culturally and ideologically biased and arrogant, and flagrantly presenting the somewhat historically dubious Spartans as overly heroic while the Persian Empire and culture are denigrated as demonised slaves and mutant-like creatures. In particular it provoked formal complaints from the Iranian government, including its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who condemned the film as an "anti-Iranian film" for "plundering Iran's historic past and insulting this civilization".[9]

In response to attacks local and abroad, director Zach Snyder made the following statement in an interview (Weiland 2007):

> [W]hen I see someone use words like "neocon[servative]", "homophobic", "homoerotic" or "racist" in their review [of *300*], I kind of just think they don't get the film and don't understand. It's a graphic novel film about a bunch of guys that are stomping the snot out of each other. As soon as you start to frame it like that, it becomes clear that you've missed the point entirely.

---

3 *300*. http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=300.htm.

4 *300 … and 70 Million Dollars!* http://www.comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=19290.

5 *300*. http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=300.htm.

6 Miller, F & Varley, L 1999. *300*. Oregon: Dark Horse Books.

7 *Eisner Award*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eisner_Award.

8 A TIME journalist (Corliss 2007) classified the film amongst the "sword-and-sandal" epics (such as *Gladiator* and *Troy*) for whom "well-tended flesh [is] as important … as … decorous women and long battle scenes".

9 *Iran condemns Hollywood war epic*. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/6446183.stm.

What follows is an attempt to put this quote in perspective, to see how the film should be interpreted and what its "point" actually is.

The history of the 300 Spartans: a brief overview

History teaches us that no event can take place without a preceding cause, a prior event that sets causality in motion and concludes with said event. Events take place because other events caused them to be, and those events, in their turn, cause other events to take place. Cause and effect should actually be effect and further effect. Now the effect that led to the creation of *300* the graphic novel and, in its turn, *300* the film and its reception, lies more than 2 500 years in the past: in the year 499 BC, when the Athenians and Eretrians instigated and successfully supported their Ionian Greek brothers to revolt against the Persian overlords. I take this date to be the start more out of sentimentality than actual logical reasoning, since this was also the pivotal date for Herodotus himself (5.97.3):

> αὗται δὲ αἱ νέες ἀρχὴ κακῶν ἐγένοντο Ἕλλησί τε καὶ βαρβάροισι.
>
> These ships [that were sent to support the Ionian rebellion] were the beginning of evils for Greeks and barbarians.

The Greeks and Ionians actually succeeded in plundering the Persian provincial capital of Sardis, a scathing insult to the Persians that they could not ignore. The Persians under king Darius the Great eventually managed to suppress the Ionian rebellion and by 490 BC they were ready to send a punitive expedition against the Eretrians and Athenians. Eretria was summarily defeated and enslaved, but to everyone's surprise the Persian army was soundly defeated by the Athenians at Marathon the moment they set foot on shore. Defeated and disheartened, the Persian army withdrew. Never mind the previous insult – now the Persians' honour and credibility as a world empire was at stake. The next expedition was not going to be a mere punitive exercise but a full-scale invasion and conquest. The invasion was delayed, however, by revolts throughout the Persian Empire and the untimely death of Darius in 485 BC. His son, Xerxes, succeeded him and after consolidating the empire and suppressing any remaining rebellions, he set off to invade the Greek mainland and peninsula in 480 BC.

At this point I must stress the severity of the situation the Greek city states found themselves in, which was apparent already in the First Persian War of 490. In terms of landmass, the Persian Empire was probably the biggest empire the world had seen up to that point, stretching from Egypt, Anatolia and Thrace in the West to the Ganges in the north of India and the foot of the Himalayas in the east. The Greeks, on the other hand, consisted of a handful of fiercely independent city-states whose loyalties to each other, based on blood, language and customs, were at the best of times tenuous. Until the Persian Wars the Greeks never thought of themselves as "Greeks". They were residents of their city-states and descendants of their city-founders, and that was where their blood and cultural loyalties ended. But after most of the city-states of Attica, Boeotia, and the Peloponnesus had banded together

against the Persians, Herodotus deemed it necessary to refer to a collective "Greek nation", i.e. τὸ ῾Ηλληνικόν, (7.139, 8.144) that consisted of:

> ὅμαιμόν τε καὶ ὁμόγλωσσον καὶ θεῶν ἱδρύματά τε κοινὰ καὶ θυσίαι ἤθεά τε ὁμότροπα....
>
> the community of blood and language, temples and ritual, and our common customs … (8.144.2).

The large number of Persians as specified by Herodotus – 1.7 million infantry soldiers (7.60) and a fleet of 3 000 ships (7.97) of which 1 207 were triremes (7.89) – has been refuted on account of the impossible logistical demands of feeding and coordinating such an immense army.[10] A more reasonable count would have been between 100 000 and 250 000 infantry soldiers and 600 triremes (see also Buckley, 1996:164). At the subsequent battle of Plataea in 479 BC the defending Greek city-states managed to amass a total of 38 700 hoplites (Hdt. 9.29), a number that seems reasonable. Therefore the Persian invading force would have been able to outnumber the Greek defenders by 3 to 1 (at best) or 6 to 1 (at worst). The Greeks, or τὸ ῾Ηλλενικόν, were not supposed to win against the full military might of the Persian Empire.

In 490 BC, in the First Persian War, the Persian army under Darius the Great received a nasty surprise, however, when they were about to finish their punitive expedition against the supporters of the Ionian rebellion, Athens and Eretria. The conquest and enslavement of Eretria was successfully managed, but while the Persian army was unloading at Marathon, the Athenian army attacked. Herodotus does not volunteer any details of the battle except that the Athenians won a decisive victory against a much larger force.[11] In this battle some key differences between Persian and Greek warfare tactics were made clear that proved to be invaluable for future conflicts with Persia.

---

[10] Several scholars have written on, and refuted, Herodotus' numbers, citing factors such as impossible logistics (Maurice 1930:210-235), the unreliability of classical authors writing about non-Greeks (Scott 1915:396-403), and calculation errors (Keyser 1986:230-242).

[11] Herodotus does not give the numbers of either side, but if the Athenians' and their allies' numbers at Plataea can be taken as an estimate, the Athenians would have numbered around 10 000 (9.28), and it is likely that the Persians' second invasion was larger than the first, which numbered probably around 100 000.

The most important factor was that the Persians used lighter armed forces that favoured shock-and-skirmish tactics to actual mêlée conflicts. Infantry usually wore little if any protective armour and fought with a short spear, a dagger and wicker shield, allowing them maximum manoeuvrability and mobility. In cases of actual mêlée battles the infantry would be supported by the heavy and light cavalry forces to harass the enemy's flanks with quick hit-and-run attacks to throw the enemy forces into panic and hinder any formation deployments. The cream of the Persian army consisted of the 10 000 "Immortals" who were the best trained and most elite soldiers of society, well versed in all aspects of Persian warfare. The Immortals were called such because their losses were constantly made up from the waiting lists from the lower ranks so that they were constantly at full strength. They were also lightly armed, fought with bow and spear, and excelled at shock tactics.

Fig 1: Persian Immortals from the archers' frieze in Darius' palace in Susa. c. 510 BC.

The Greeks, however, for whom fighting each other was practically a way of life, developed and perfected the phalanx which consisted of rows of closely packed soldiers, usually eight shields deep. These attempted to shove apart and break the opposing phalanx by means of their shields[12]. Once a phalanx broke, the battle was lost, since the victorious phalanx would simply bulldoze its way over the broken and disordered phalanx and the unfortunate soldiers who could not flee fast enough. Fighting for the city-state, in Athens as well as in the other city-states, was a status thing: if you could not afford the armour you were of lower class, could not vote in the assembly and therefore, technically, you were not part of the πόλις (city-state), nor were you a πολίτης (citizen of the city-state) since you could not take part in the

[12] Xenophon *Hell*. 6.4.12 tells us that at the Battle of Leuctra (341 BC) the Thebans purposefully stacked one wing of their phalanx 50 shields deep to break through their enemy's phalanx and thereby destroy its cohesion and the relative protection it offered its soldiers. This, however, was exceptional since it is the only account of a phalanx stacked more than 25 shields deep (cf. Thuc. 4.93).

πολιτεία[13] or help to protect it.[14] It was therefore beneath the paid-up middle class hoplite, despite the tactical advantages it could offer, to fight with or even be supported by a non-tax-paying skirmisher who could not afford the armour.

A proper battle was therefore between two phalanxes – no skirmishers or light-armed troops and few if any cavalry. The armour consisted of the most basic item, namely the shield, with which a hoplite protected himself as well as the man to his left, and, along with his fellow soldiers, shoved against the enemy phalanx, and his spear, which only really came into play once the enemy phalanx had broken. Helmets and breastplates became lighter or were even completely omitted in later years (Lazenby 1989:58; cf. Thuc. 4.34).[15]

Fig 1: A Greek hoplite with the characteristic bowl shield and Corinthian helmet. Bronze Krater c. 500 BC.

With the second Persian invasion finally looming in 480 BC, the Greeks had to come up with the best possible solution to halt the invaders. An open field battle would be suicide since the slow and unmanoeuvrable Greek phalanxes would be quickly overrun and cut down by the lighter Persian cavalry and infantry. Add to this the Persians' numerical superiority and the Greeks were indeed lost. But if they could pick a site that would prevent the Persians from outflanking them, funnelling their forces against Greek shields and spears, the heavier armoured Greeks would be at an advantage to stem the Persian tide (Hdt. 7.211.2, cf. Holladay (1982:100), Hanson (1999:395) and How (1923:128).

---

13 Probably the best summary of this concept (lit. "things concerning the city-state") is from Paul Cartledge 1993:91: [P]olitics – in the sense of the sorts of things that went on in public spaces of a Greek city (assembly, law courts, agora, theatre, and so on), or on the battlefield – quite simply were more important than any other aspect of [a private citizen's] life in Classical Greece …

14 Cf. Aristotle's viewpoint (*Pol*. 1297b) on the responsibilities of a πολίτης.

15 On a fuller description of Spartan war gear, see Cartledge 1977:11-27.

Fig 3: Persians deploying, as depicted in the graphic novel (top) and the film (bottom)

The Spartans, who rightly held the reputation as the most professional and effective soldiers in Greece, were elected by the temporary Hellenic League to lead the Greeks in protecting their city-states. It was finally decided to attempt a stand against the Persian tide at the pass near Thermopylae where the mountainous surroundings on the one side and the coast on the other would force the Persians into a narrow, well defensible strip of land that would negate their superior numbers completely.

A major drawback of the Spartans was their overly religious and superstitious nature – a natural characteristic of a nation born and bred to court war and death where physical ability sometimes needs all the supernatural help it can get. As luck would then have it, the Persians invaded Greece on the eve of a religious festival, the Carneia, a time when military activities were strictly prohibited. This was also the time of the Olympic festival for the rest of the Greeks, which further delayed the Greeks' deployment (Hdt. 7.206). These factors, as well as the oracle's doom prophecies (Hdt. 7.140, 220), contributed to the fact that only a small vanguard of just more than 7 000 hoplites, with the Spartan king Leonidas and his 300 bodyguards in the lead, were sent to plug the pass at Thermopylae against the Persian land troops. The entire combined Greek navy, just more than 300 triremes, most of which were Athenian, was sent to attempt to hold the Persian fleet, twice the size of the Greeks', at bay at Artemisium.

Experience from Marathon cautioned Xerxes not to just force his way through the pass, but to rather attempt to destroy the Greek navy so that he could land his troops behind the pass (Prentice 1920:13). This resulted in the Battle of Artemisium where the smaller Greek fleet managed to do some considerable damage to the large Persian fleet until the Greek fleet itself had to fall back to Salamis for repairs (Hdt. 8.18). Xerxes was further hopeful that the mere sight of his army would dishearten and demoralize the Greek defenders, causing them to abandon their position, but after four days of inactivity at the pass and the poor performance of his fleet, Xerxes ordered the attack on the fifth day. For the next two days the Greek defenders at Thermopylae withstood everything the Persians threw at them, even the elite Immortals proving unsuccessful against the Greek phalanxes in a confined space. According to Herodotus it was a local Greek named Ephialtes that betrayed the back route to the Persians, allowing the defenders to be enveloped and cut down from all sides. Hearing this[16] and the resulting dismay of the defenders, Leonidas ordered the defenders home, but kept a small force consisting of his 300 Spartans, 700 Thespians (whose city was just beyond the pass), and 400 Thebans (whose loyalties were questionable and who were therefore basically kept as hostages), to cover the Greeks' retreat (Hdt. 7.222). On the third and last day of battle at Thermopylae the remainder of the 300 Spartans, 700 Thespians and 400 Thebans held the pass as long as they could until they were completely wiped out by the Persians.

---

16 See Simpson 1972:6-7 for a more complete analysis of Leonidas' options, as well as Prentice 1920:15-16, who argues that it was the withdrawal of the Greek fleet from Artemisium, allowing the Persians to circumvent the pass from the sea, that compelled Leonidas to order the retreat, rather than betrayal (see also Hdt. 7.214).

Fig 4: The pass at Thermopylae. The ancient coastline is believed to be at the paved road.

The Persian fleet followed the Greek fleet to Salamis where the narrow strait between the island and the mainland caused their numbers to be a liability in the face of the smaller, more manoeuvrable Greek fleet and they were soundly defeated. Xerxes saw the end of the campaign with the defeat of his fleet and returned with it to Asia, leaving his land army to spend the winter in Greece. The next year saw the defeat of the Persian land army at Plataea at the hands of a combined Greek army of 38 700 hoplites under the leadership of Pausanias and his 5 000 Spartans.[17]

300 – the graphic novel and film

As a young boy Frank Miller saw the film *The 300 Spartans* in 1962 and the film had more than just a passing effect on him, as he himself stated in an interview (Epstein 2007):

> I've always loved the [300 Spartans at Thermopylae's] story. It's the best story I've ever got my hands on. I was a little boy of seven when I saw this clunky old movie from 20th Century Fox called *The 300 Spartans*. …[While watching the movie] I jump[ed] back over and sat down next to my Dad and said, "Dad, are the good guys going to die?" "I'm afraid so, son." I went and sat

[17] Herodotus (9.28) mentions a total of 10 000 Lacedaimonians of whom 5 000 were from Sparta.

down and watched the end of the movie and the course of my creative life changed because all of a sudden the heroes weren't the guys who get the medal at the end of Star Wars. They're people who do the right thing, damn the consequences.

Fig 5: Dilios reaches the climactic end of his tale about his king's training

In the context of this quotation it is easy to see that the graphic novel of *300* is nothing more than a tribute from Frank Miller to the 300 Spartans who stood and died against insurmountable odds. It is not a faithful representation of history, nor have Frank Miller or Zack Snyder ever claimed it to be. In terms of entertainment Snyder refers to it as "an opera, not a documentary" (Horowitz 2007) as well as historical fantasy (Nelson 2006; Vergano 2007). The latter notion is enforced by the role of Dilios the Spartan narrator, himself a member of the 300, who was dismissed by Leonidas on the last day at Thermopylae so that he could tell others about the 300's sacrifice.

The graphic novel and film follow slightly different timelines, but it all comes down to a persuasive and imaginative storyteller "who knows how not to wreck a good story with truth" (Nelson 2006). This effectively gave the creator artistic licence to make his graphic novel as sensational and impressive as possible, a loophole which the movie director exploited further.

The graphic novel is divided into five chapters, namely *Honour*, *Duty*, *Glory*, *Combat* and *Victory*. *Honour* begins as the 300 Spartans are already marching towards Thermopylae in 480 BC. While the army camped overnight Dilios tells his fellow soldiers the story of their king's boyhood agoge training in the wilderness, fighting a beast in a way that foreshadows the defence at Thermopylae, and, on his return, being proclaimed king. The story then returns to the present time to look at king Leonidas' restlessness, namely the beast which he himself provoked and brought upon Sparta, and we are taken to the scene barely a year ago, when the Persian messengers demanded submission in the ritualistic form of earth and water from the Spartans. Leonidas, not impressed with the messenger's threats, was compelled by Spartan honour and reputation to turn them down because the Athenians had already done so, by kicking them into a pit "to collect their earth and water", their execution acting as a declaration of war on Persia.[18]

In *Duty* the scene shifts to where Leonidas confronts the Ephors in an attempt to convince and bribe them so that they can send the entire Spartan army to Thermopylae. The Ephors refuse, citing as reason the coming Carneia festival, during which no military activity may take place, and using the oracle's divinations to back them up. Leonidas, knowing what his duty is despite the law of the Ephors, decided to stretch his legs by taking a walk up north with his personal bodyguard of 300 soldiers. On their way to Thermopylae the Spartans meet up with, amongst others, the Arcadians and continue on to entrench themselves at, and to fortify, the Thermopylaean pass.

Glory starts with a Persian envoy attempting to intimidate the Spartans into surrendering, but being turned down. Ephialtes, a disfigured Spartan who should have been exposed at birth due to his physical defects, is introduced for the first time. His parents had fled with him from Sparta and trained him in the Spartan way of war, and Ephialtes now wants to redeem his father's name by fighting for the Spartans and basking in Spartan glory. Leonidas has to turn him down since Ephialtes' defects will not allow him to stand firm in the phalanx, and in his disillusionment and frustration he attempts to commit suicide. Just then the Persian myriads assemble, ready to attack.

Combat recounts the first day of intense and brutal fighting, Xerxes' attempt to first cajole and then intimidate Leonidas into submission, and the first night of fighting. Each successive fight is costly to the Persians since the Spartans not only manage to stem their attacks, but to route the Persian attackers altogether.

---

[18] In the DVD commentary Frank Miller admitted that this particular scene actually happened ten years before, at the advent of the First Persian War in 490 BC. In 480 BC Xerxes didn't send messengers to either Sparta or Athens because of what they had done to the messengers the previous time. Cf. Hdt. 7.133.

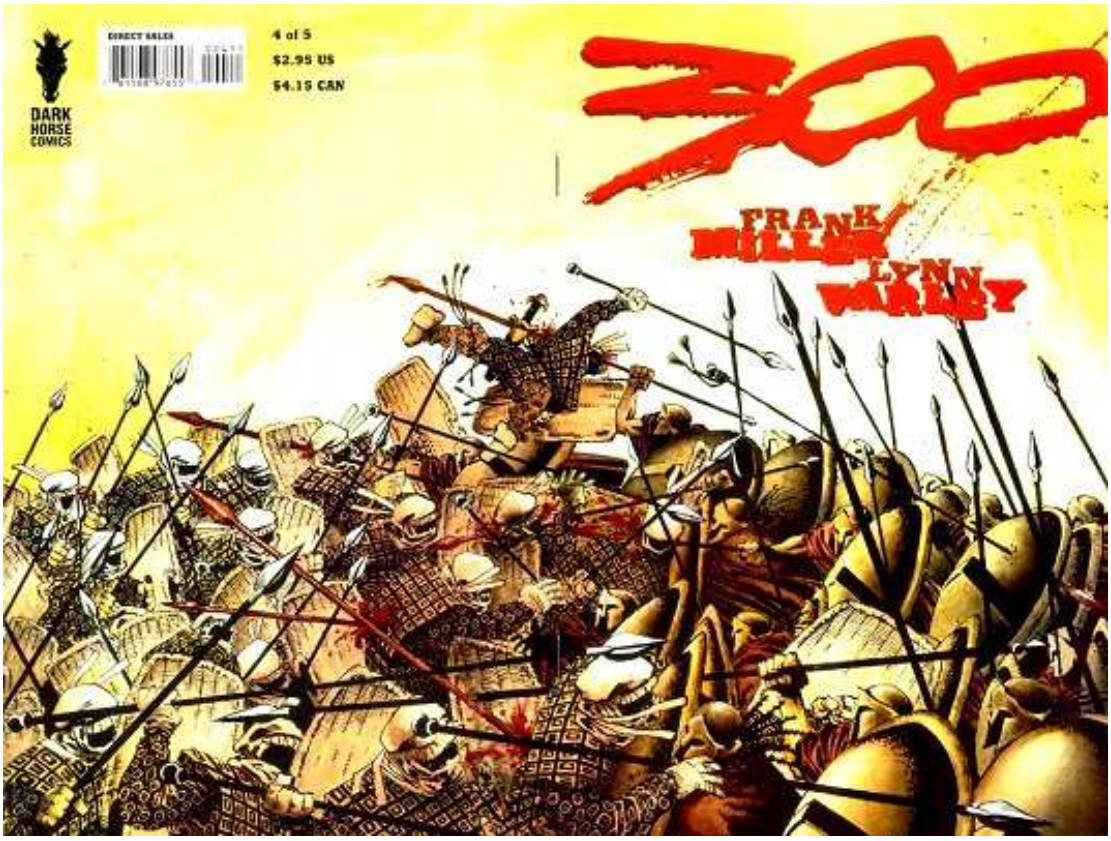

Fig 6: The cover spread of Combat showing a Persian attack being crushed by the Spartans.

The last book is named *Victory* and it may seem paradoxical to anyone who knows that the Spartans are to be cut down here. But, just as Dilios realised, this was the whole point of the 300 Spartans' sacrifice. It is at this point that the disfigured and unfit Spartan Ephialtes, after being denied the privilege of fighting alongside the Spartans on account of his physical disabilities, betrays the Spartans and sells the back route to the Persians. Upon discovering this, the other Greeks at Thermopylae lose hope and Leonidas sends them home, keeping only his Spartans to be sacrificed. Dilios, however, is also sent home so that he can spread the story of the 300's sacrifice to the rest of Greece. The 300 Spartans then stand against and die in the Persian onslaught from all sides.

Leonidas' last words to Dilios, as he dismisses him, are as follows:

> You will deliver my final orders to the council – with force and verve – and you will make every Greek know what happened here. You'll have a grand tale to tell. A tale of victory.

Dilios did not understand how the king could foresee victory in this inevitable defeat, yet he did not question it. This victory was achieved, however, saw Dilios, barely a year later, as he stood with 10 000 Spartans at the head of 30 000 free Greeks against the Persian myriads, ready to finally drive the Persians from Greece itself.

He realised that Leonidas and his 300 Spartans didn't give their lives to only protect Sparta, but the whole of Greece, inspiring its city-states to set their rivalries aside and unite against the Persian invaders. The Greek city-states were finally rescued from the "old, dark, stupid ways" and were now about to "usher in a future that is surely brighter than we can imagine". Leonidas therefore knew that 300 Spartan lives would be a fair price to pay for their ultimate victory and it was Dilios who successfully spread their tale.

After finally being cut down by the Persians, the 300 Spartans, in the words of Dilios, only ask:

> Remember us.
>
> Should any free soul come across this place in all the countless centuries yet to be, may our voices whisper to you from the ageless stones.
>
> Go tell the Spartans, passer-by – that here, by Spartan law, we lie.[19]

Fig 7: Remember us.

[19] Simonides' epitaph reads as follows (Hdt. 7.228.2):
῾Ω ξεῖν', ἀγγέλλειν Λακεδαιμονίοις ὅτι τῇδε
κείμεθα, τοῖς κείνων ῥήμασι πειθόμενοι.
Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by,
that here, obedient to their law, we lie.

The role of the narrator

As was said earlier, the story of *300* is not a historical documentary. Zack Snyder himself classifies the film as "opera" (Horowitz 2007). This gave him at least some sensationalistic liberties, making a film that is visually and imaginatively impressive. Frank Miller's original version was done as a comic book of which the most important convention is the visually impressive and attractive panels, and it was this style to which Snyder adhered as far as possible, reproducing some iconic scenes of the graphic novel in the film. Modern technologies allowed for very impressive computer generated graphics – the entire film was shot indoors in the course of 60 days (except for one scene with galloping horses, which was shot outside) (Olsen 2007) while post-production took a full year and ten special effects companies during which the sceneries and landscapes were added (Grossman 2007). The whole purpose was to create Frank Miller's illustrative feel of the graphic novel in the film, as well as of course to create spectacular battles that would not have been possible otherwise.

Fig 8: The declaration of war scene is one of the iconic scenes that Snyder tried to reproduce as faithfully as possible (top) Miller's original (bottom).

From a Classical angle this story could be compared with the Homeric version of the *Iliad* in which the seasoned traveller and warrior king Odysseus is the narrator, telling the tale of his travels to the Phaeacians. What was to stop Odysseus to embellish a bit on his travels, making it the epic fantasy we know instead of just a tragic catalogue of his journey? So it is with *300*: Dilios is telling this story, a point made a lot clearer in the film since the voiceless narrator of the graphic novel was changed to the character Dilios in the film. In the film he begins the tale while at Plataea, looking back on Leonidas' agoge training, the declaration of the war, the unsuccessful exhortation of the Ephors.[20] He then tells of the three days' intense fighting, his dismissal and his narration in front of the Spartan council. His role is therefore much more streamlined in the film, where he tells the entire tale at Plataea, than in the graphic novel, where it is sometimes unclear which narrator (Dilios or an unseen narrator) is currently speaking.

This, then, is what is the whole point of the story of *300*; for all its historical inaccuracies, for the cultural, political and ethnic bias that is portrayed in the graphic novel and the film, it all comes down to the Spartan Dilios' version of the events that occurred at Thermopylae. On his story telling skills rested the responsibility of not failing the sacrifice of Leonidas and his 300 Spartans; Sparta must be swayed and compelled to come out of their xenophobia and outdated beliefs and lead the Greek nations against their common foe. Therefore this is a Spartan story, told by a Spartan, for Spartans; the other Greek city-states that fought at Thermopylae, although they were named and their numbers given, are never shown. Only the Arcadians, whose leader seems to share an amicable relationship with Leonidas, and the Thespians, who were overrun by the Persians on the last day, are shown at all. Xerxes' myriads were held at bay by a mere 300 Spartans and the presence of the rest of 7000 Greeks didn't feature at all in Dilios' narrative.

Fig 9: The Greek nations that fought at Thermopylae are mentioned but never seen.

[20] This is notable since at the camp scene at the beginning of the film Dilios is already blinded in one eye from a wound he picked up at Thermopylae, but in the graphic novel the same scene has Dilios unscathed, as well as having Leonidas as part of his audience (see *Fig. 5*); hence in this scene in the graphic novel they are still en route to Thermopylae.

The film takes this even further: whereas the graphic novel refers to the thousands of Greeks that left Thermopylae, the film claims in the same scene that it was only hundreds. Furthermore, while the graphic novel portrayed the Persians as effeminate (in contrast to the overly masculine Spartans), and in the case of the Immortals, sinister, the film presents them even as demonic, monstrous and mutant-like. The narrator further brings fantasy-like beasts into his account: the mammoth elephants of the graphic novel are even bigger and are joined by a giant rhinoceros in the film. The film further supplies Persian magicians that hurl sparkly grenades, the Immortals let loose the savage and gigantic Über Immortal (as he is generally referred to by fans), and the axe-man, with whom a displeased Xerxes executes his generals, turns in the film into a mutant-like creature with Palaeolithic-like axe appendages for hands.

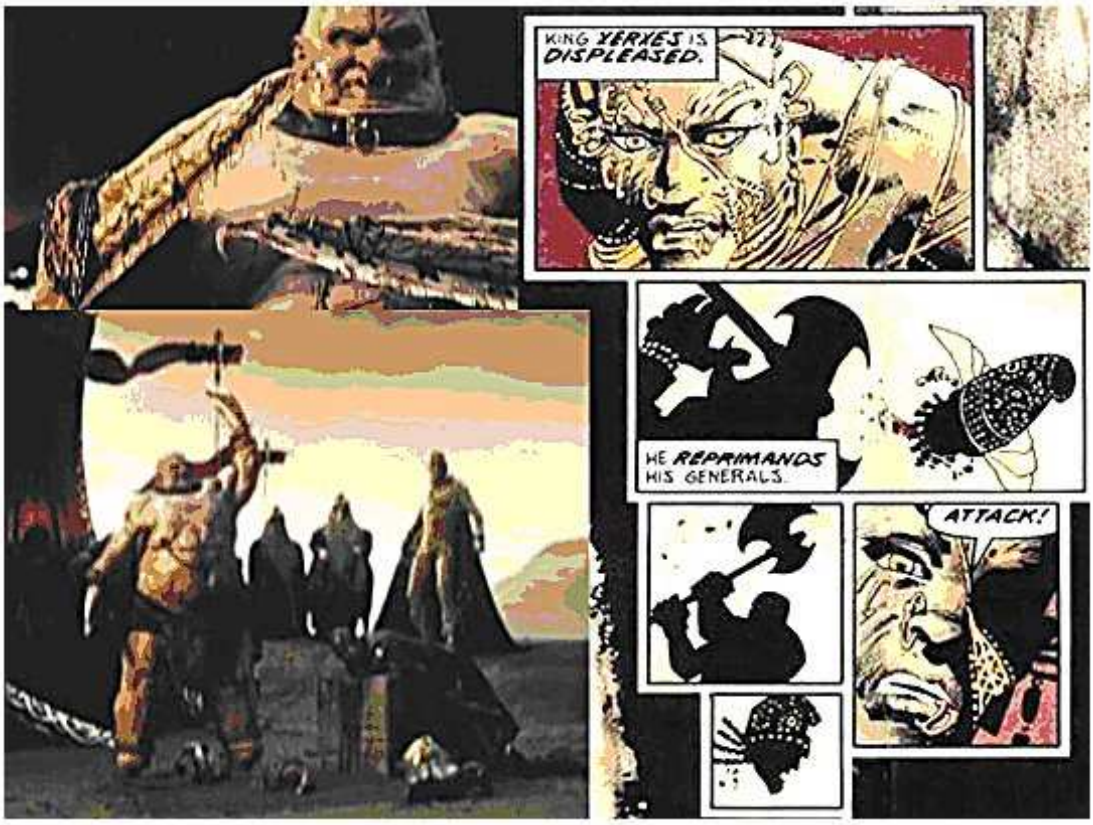

Fig 10: The development of the axe man, from the graphic novel (right), to the film (left).

Fig 11: Immortals as they appear in the graphic novel (left) and the film (right).

Fig 12: Spartans dispatching Xerxes' beasts

But it isn't only the Persians that are displayed as anything less than ideally masculine or honourable; in typical Frank Miller style the evil ones are always presented as, if not monstrous, then notably ugly or deformed. The Ephors, who in reality were ordinary annually elected state officials with more administrative than religious duties, are shown to be diseased, leprous, lecherous and corrupt old mystics whose only use for the oracle is to satiate their lust and who would much rather betray Sparta for Persian gold than to support its freedom.

Also Ephialtes, the disfigured hunchback who should have been killed at infancy due to his deformity, betrays the Spartans out of his disillusionment for not being able to fight alongside them. Evil is therefore presented as physically unattractive and deformed, while good is best presented by the peak physical condition and discipline of the Spartan soldiers.

The obvious exception is, of course, the Spartan traitor Therion.[21] Backed by Persian gold, he organises the corruption of the Ephors, preventing the main Spartan army from marching to Thermopylae, and further tries to prevent or at least stall a relief force to be sent to help Leonidas, all the while looking as fit and attractive (if not even more so) as any of the other Spartans – clearly an un-Frank-Millerian touch (cf. Corliss 1997).

On a more historical note: according to Herodotus there were at least two Spartans that were dismissed[22] on the last day (Hdt. 7.229-230; see also 9.71; cf. Plut. *Mor*. 225E). Both had suffered from an eye infection (as is recalled by Dilios' own loss of one eye) but only one, despite his bad sight, returned to Thermopylae to die with his fellow-Spartans. The other returned to Sparta where he was shunned from society, labelled a "trembler" for not standing and dying at Thermopylae (Hdt. 7.231). The character of Dilios is based on this survivor, minus the shame and guilt, so that someone could at least have survived to tell the tale of the 300's sacrifice.

---

21 Zack Snyder added an entire sub-story featuring Leonidas' wife, queen Gorgo, and her attempt to rally support to send the Spartan army to relieve and support the soldiers at Thermopylae. Therion, a member of the Spartan council, undermined her completely by offering his political support in return for her body and not only backing out of their deal, but openly accusing her of adultery in the council. The historical Gorgo, to my mind, would not have stood for this utter lack of respect (cf. Hdt. 5.51, 7.239; Plut. *Mor*. 225A.12, 240D.1-240E.6). Although she plays a far smaller role in the graphic novel, she nevertheless comes across a lot more headstrong and almost fierce.

22 Herodotus makes mention of another Spartan survivor (7.232), a messenger who missed the final day at Thermopylae. When he arrived in Sparta afterwards he found himself so covered in shame and disgrace that he committed suicide.

Notable historicity of 300

Despite Dilios' retelling of history in favour of the glorification of Spartan courage and honour, his almost negation of the role of any other Greek city-state and his condemning of the Persian Empire, there are indeed some notable historically correct events that need to be highlighted.

The graphic novel itself, more than the film, is surprisingly close to the history as we have it. We are given a glimpse of the Spartan lifestyle: the inspection of babies and their disposal if they are unfit, the almost unthinkably harsh and torturous training to make Spartan boys soldiers and their continuous training thereafter, the unquestionable and unshakeable discipline and bravery of Spartan soldiers, and the butchery that follows at the wrong end of a well-trained and disciplined Spartan phalanx.

Frank Miller betrays an intimate knowledge of the Greek phalanx in the following explanation by Leonidas to Ephialtes:

> We fight as a single impenetrable unit. That's the source of our strength. Each Spartan protects the man to his left, from thigh to neck, with his shield. A single weak spot – and the phalanx shatters.

This was seen in every illustration that featured a Spartan phalanx – the robust and unbreakable wall that is the phalanx' shield wall. The film, however, had to improvise a bit more since historical correctness and even practicality cannot override Hollywood conventions: there are a few phalanx scenes (very well executed), but every time the formation breaks open and the Spartans start to butcher Persians one-on-one, discarding their spears and fighting with swords – a gross anachronism that is paradoxical in its very nature since these cases of exceptionally well choreographed sword work is impossible with the encumbering bronze shield and limited eyesight of the Corinthian helmet used in the graphic novel and film.[23]

Two scenes were added just to allow for more individual and impressive fighting: during the very first phalanx scene King Leonidas breaks ranks and butchers his way through the first attack wave, and at the end of the last day, two Spartans go on ahead, almost routing an entire Persian attack on their own. One of the Spartans was finally killed by a Persian horseman because they had gone too far ahead for anyone to give them sufficient protection.

---

[23] Cf. Luginbill 1994:51-61 for a more in-depth analysis of hoplite fighting, as well as Buckley 1996:50-51 and Lazenby 1989:54-55, 58 for the development of hoplite war gear that necessitated the phalanx formation.

Fig 13: King Leonidas breaks ranks and, despite being vulnerable, still butchers on.

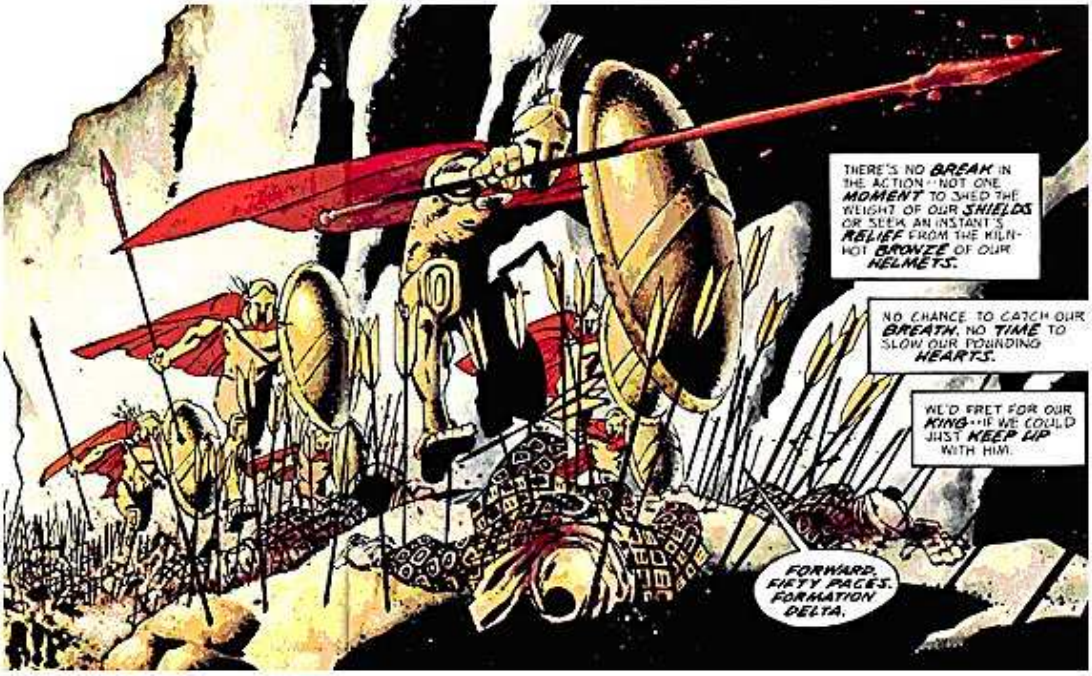

Fig 14: The scene that inspired Leonidas' charge in the film (Fig. 13). Here the Spartans are actually concerned about his safety so far ahead.

I would like to highlight some historically noteworthy events and quotations in the graphic novel and film. The very first is the famous "only Spartan women can give birth to real men" quotation in the film that queen Gorgo throws at the Persian messenger who questions her, or any female's, presence during political discussion (Plut. *Mor*. 240E.5).

Just after that we have the declaration of war scene where the Persian messenger demands Spartan submission and is thrown into a pit "to collect his earth

and water" (*Fig*. 8). As previously stated, this event took place at the advent of the first Persian War in 490 BC (Hdt. 6.49, and esp. 7.133).

Next is the moving scene where Gorgo tells Leonidas to "come back with [his] shield or on it", implying that he should rather die (and be carried home on his shield as a makeshift pall), than to flee from battle (by discarding his shield) (Plut. *Mor.* 241F.16). A Spartan that fled the phalanx and returned was labelled a τρέσσᾶς, lit. "trembler", and was shunned by all Spartans for the rest of his life; denied fire and even basic interaction, it was expected of a trembler to commit suicide rather than to live in such shame (cf. Xen. *Lac*. 9; Hdt. 7.231).

Fig 15: With your shield, or on it.

Fig 16: Sparta needs sons.

Just prior to that Leonidas had made the statement that "Sparta needs more sons" referring to the motives for his and Gorgo's physical activities the previous night. The historical version is actually Gorgo asking Leonidas on his departure how she should now behave to appear properly Spartan (preparing herself for her widowed status). His reply to her was to marry good men and bear children, because "Sparta needs sons" (Plut. *Mor.* 225A.2, 240E.6). Spartans had no scruples about polyandry or polygamy; if the liaison could produce soldiers for Sparta then it was a good thing (Xen. *Lac*. 1.6-8; Cartledge 2004:169).

Another famous episode occurred while the Spartans were rebuilding the Phocian wall at Thermopylae, when the Persian emissary warned the Spartans that the Persians are so numerous that the number of arrows they shot would blot out the sun. A Spartan replied: "Then we will fight in the shade" (Hdt. 7.226).

But probably the most famous quote is that of Leonidas replying to the Persians' demand that he and his soldiers lay down their weapons, "Come and get it" (Plut. *Mor*. 225D.11).

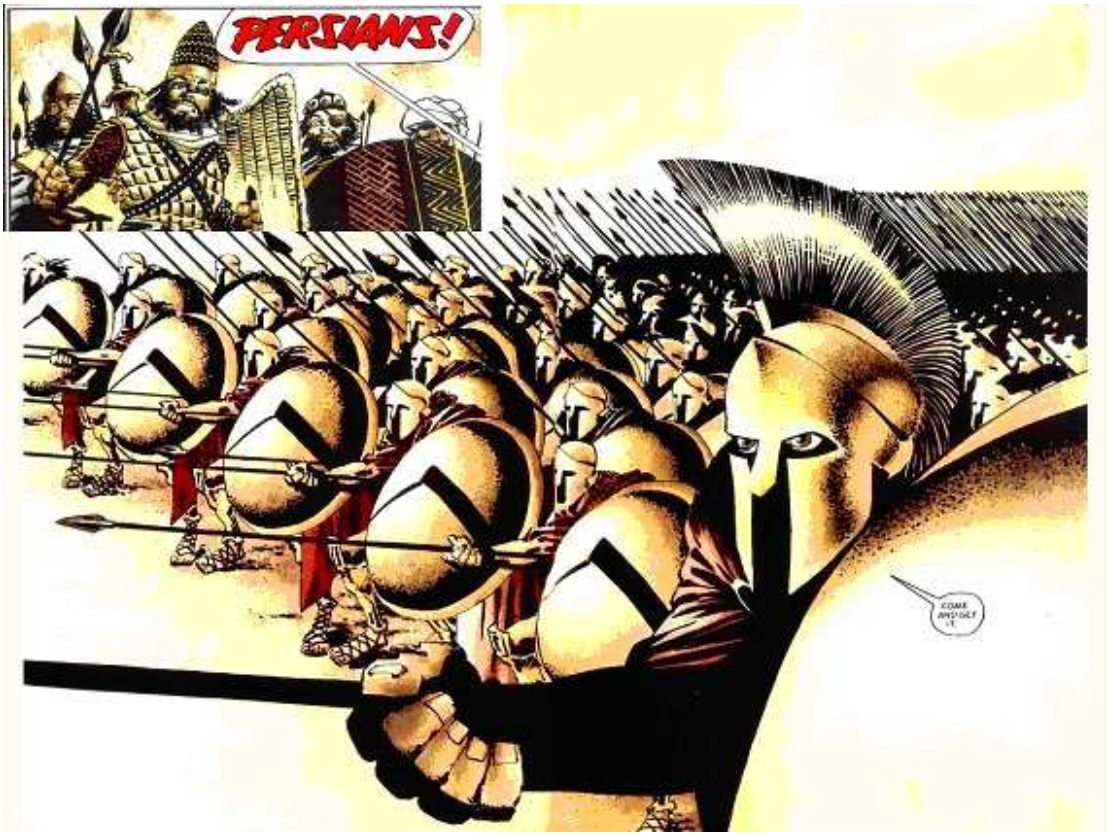

Fig 17: Come and get it.

On the last night, when the Greeks discovered that they have been betrayed and that the Persians were about to envelop them, Leonidas told his soldiers: "Spartans. Ready your breakfast and eat hearty, for tonight we dine in hell!" (Plut. *Mor*. 225D.11).

My personal favourite scenes are those in the graphic novel of the two Spartans combing their hair, the one while the army is still en route to Thermopylae, and the other just before the battle at Plataea. Herodotus (7.208-9) writes of Xerxes' bafflement upon hearing his scouts talk about Spartans who, in preparation for a battle, brush, comb and oil their hair.

Long hair in Spartan society meant that you could not do any menial work or labour and were therefore of the warrior class, a professional soldier in continuous training to serve Sparta in battle (Xen. *Lac*. 11; cf. Hdt. 1.82).

Fig 18: Hair care en route to Thermopylae (left) and before Plataea (right).

Conclusion

Primarily *300* is an action story. The story spans only a few days, back-flashes included; most of it is taken up with vicious and bitter fighting. There is no character development, no depth, no story line, no plot. It features soldiers fighting and killing each other, trying to stay alive for as long as possible, relying on skill, luck and discipline. It is gruesome and for some reason it sells.

The object is therefore not to read into it any modern West vs. East politics, ideology or supremacy. It is, of course, unfortunate that since this story is based on an actual historical conflict there are going to be “bad guys” and “good guys”, or rather “the side that lost” and “the side that won”. This does not mean that one of the cultures is superior to the other, or that today the descendants of that culture are.

Nor is it a historical documentary. The story told is a Spartan version, full of Spartan bias, self-glorification, ethnic superiority and propaganda. The messenger Dilios had to leave his fellow soldiers behind at the order of the king, to deliver his story to the Spartan council and the other free Greeks. This is the Spartan version – as recreated by a successful American comic artist and writer who has great respect and admiration for the Spartan warrior nation. His version, again, was recreated, retold even, by an American film director who wanted to make a good, visually impressive film of the graphic novel.

It was indeed, in the words of king Leonidas, “a grand tale to tell”.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary sources:

Aristotle: *Politics*. Reeve, C.D.C. (trans.) 1998. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.

Herodotus: *The Histories*. De Sélincourt, A. (trans.) 1954. London: Penguin Books.

Miller, F & Varley, L 1999. *300*. Oregon: Dark Horse Books.

Plutarch: *Moralia* (Volume III). Babbitt, F.C. (trans.) 1931. (Loeb Classical Library). London: William Heinemann.

Thucydides: *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Warner, R. (trans.) 1972. London: Penguin Books.

Xenophon: *History of my Times*. Warner, R. (trans.). 1966. London: Penguin Books.

Secondary sources:

Buckley, T 1996. *Aspects of Greek History 750-323 BC: A Source-Based Approach*. London: Routledge.

Cartledge, P 1977. Hoplites and Heroes: Sparta's Contribution to the Technique of Ancient Warfare. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 97: 11-27.

Cartledge, P 1993. *The Greeks: A Portrait of Self and Others*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cartledge, P 2004. *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece*. New York: Vintage Books.

Holladay, A J 1982. Hoplites and Heresies. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102: 94-103.

Hanson, V D 1999. The Status of Ancient Military History: Traditional Work, Recent Research, and On-Going Controversies. *The Journal of Military History* 63(2): 379-413.

How, W W 1923. Arms, Tactics and Strategy in the Persian War. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 43(2): 117-132.

Keyser, P 1986. Errors of Calculation in Herodotus. *The Classical Journal* 81(3): 230-242.

Lazenby, J 1989. Hoplite Warfare. In Hackett, J. (Ed.). *Warfare in the Ancient World*. 54-81. London: Sidgwick & Jackson Limited.

Luginbill, R D 1994. Othismos: The Importance of the Mass-Shove in Hoplite Warfare. *Phoenix* 48(1): 51-61.

Maurice, F 1930. The Size of the Army of Xerxes in the Invasion of Greece 480 BC. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 50(2): 210-235.

Prentice, W K 1920. Thermopylae and Artemisium. *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 51: 5-18.

Scott, J A 1915. Thoughts on the Reliability of Classical Writers, with Especial Reference to the Size of the Army of Xerxes. *The Classical Journal* 10(9): 396-403.

Simpson, R H 1972. Leonidas' Decision. *Phoenix* 26(1): 1-11.

Internet sources:

Anonymous Undated. 300. Box Office Mojo, LLC. (Retrieved 28 November 2007). http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=300.htm.

Anonymous Undated. Eisner Award. Wikipedia. (Retrieved 28 November). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eisner_Award.

Anonymous 12 March 2007. 300… and 70 Million Dollars! Comingsoon.net. http://www.comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=19290.

Anonymous 13 March 2007. Iran condemns Hollywood war epic. BBC News. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/6446183.stm

Corliss, R 14 March 2007. *7 Reasons why* 300 *is a huge hit*. TIME. http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1598977,00.html.

Epstein, D R Undated. *Frank Miller, 300 Interview*. Under Ground Online. (Retrieved 10 December 2007). http://www.ugo.com/ugo/html/article/?id=16424&sectionId=106.

Grossman, L 2 March 2007. *The Art of War*. TIME. http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1595241,00.html.

Horowitz, J 13 March 2007. *'300' Trivia: Albino Giants, Sequel Chances — And Sienna Miller*. MTV. http://www.mtv.com/movies/news/articles/1554534/20070313/story.jhtml.

Nelson, R 1 February 2006. 300 *Mixes History, Fantasy*. SciFi Wire. http://www.scifi.com/scifiwire/index.php?category=0&id=34442.

Olsen, M 14 January 2007. *An epic battle is pumped up*. Los Angeles Times, Calendar Live Com. http://www.calendarlive.com/movies/cl-ca-spartans14jan14,0,925494.story?coll=cl-movies.

Vergano, D 6 March 2007. *This is Sparta? The History behind the movie '300'*. USA Today. http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/columnist/vergano/2007-03-05-300-history_N.htm.

Weiland, J 14 March 2007. *"300" Post-Game: One-on-One With Zack Snyder*. Comic Book Resources. http://www.comicbookresources.com/news/newsitem.cgi?id=9982.